



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom

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Virtual

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Turkel, and I would like to thank all of our distinguished witnesses for joining us today.

As part and parcel of Russia's horrific war, Russian officials and pro-Kremlin propagandists have launched a massive disinformation campaign in a futile effort to convince its people and the world that its invasion of Ukraine is just.

Disturbingly, the Russian government has repeatedly turned to shocking examples of antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion as a part of that effort.

When President Putin announced his country's invasion of Ukraine, he falsely claimed that the goal of his so-called "special military operation" was to "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine." We know there is no justification for Russia's aggression against its neighbor and that such claims against Ukraine have no basis in reality. However, we also cannot ignore the pernicious antisemitism of these statements. Russian officials know it doesn't make sense to claim to "denazify" a country with a Jewish leader. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself lost family members at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust. Yet, this has not stopped high-ranking Russian officials from promoting these bogus lies. When confronted about President Zelenskyy's Jewishness and the denazification narrative, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov replied with more hateful rhetoric blaming Jews for the Holocaust. This is just one example of many official Russian statements intended to hijack the truth, history, and the memory of the Holocaust for its own twisted political agenda.

And it's not limited to just rhetoric; Russian forces attacking Ukraine have also physically desecrated Holocaust remembrance sites and sadly killed Holocaust survivors. Early in the war, Russian missiles damaged the grounds of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center in Kyiv, which memorializes the location where Nazi Germany and local collaborators murdered more than 33,000 Jews over the course of two days in 1941. The Russian military also damaged a menorah at the

Drobitsky Yar Holocaust memorial complex in Kharkiv, a site that memorializes the lives of 15,000 Jews who were killed there.

Neither has the Russian government limited its rhetoric to “denazification.” One Russian official went so far as to call for the “desatanization of Ukraine,” referring to several religious groups like the Church of Scientology and Chabad Lubavitch as “neo-pagan cults” promoted by a Ukrainian government that had forced its citizens to abandon “traditional religious values.” “Desatanization” should be understood as nothing less than the elimination of Ukraine’s flourishing religious diversity. It moreover foreshadows the harsh treatment these groups would face under Russian rule.

The Russian government’s hateful rhetoric and actions towards Ukrainians speaks volumes as to why the fight against Russian disinformation, Holocaust distortion, and antisemitism must continue hand-in-hand with other efforts to hold the Russian government accountable.

With that, I would like to turn the floor over to my colleague, USCIRF

Commissioner Sharon Kleinbaum who would like to say a few words as well.